

APPENDIX 5 Action with Communities in Rural England

Workshop Summaries

Stalisfield Village Hall, Kent, March 2019

This workshop took place in rural Kent. Unfortunately, the lack of connectivity meant our ERP partners could not join us so a separate discussion (notes below) took place later via Zoom kindly hosted by Kirsten Burke Lund.

The initial discussions centred around the knowledge of practitioners and the ACRE members delivery of EU co-funded work, so these notes are a commentary on England's experiences and the likely losses post Brexit.

- Several ACRE Network organisations have experience of delivering EU co-funded work in rural areas. Currently, ACRE organisations in Cambridgeshire, Essex, West of England and Wiltshire are either accountable bodies for – or host – LEADER Local Action Groups. In counties such as Cornwall, Kent, Cumbria, Durham and Norfolk there also is significant ACRE Network experience of delivering EU co-funded work (including some transnational cooperation) under programmes such as the European Maritime & Fisheries Fund, European Social Fund, Grundtvig, Leonardo.
- There is a view within the ACRE Network that the current iteration of LEADER, in England, has not focused on small-scale community-led initiatives – but instead operated as a capital grants programme for small business. Whilst this approach has supported creation of jobs, there is a question as to whether this is really where the best use of public funds can be made.
- There is a view within parts of the ACRE Network that EU rural policy has more of a social focus than it does in England (where current national-level rural policy is an interpretation of European policy – but one where that interpretation means that the “promotion (of) social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas” is to be delivered by providing grants to individual businesses.)
- There are projects and services operating now in rural communities across England that were initiated with LEADER funds from previous programmes.
- It appears not possible to apply for co-operation funds in England, under EAFRD. They are a legal requirement, and so questions remain as to how these monies have been used. Focusing on single-business projects – as opposed to community-wide or multiple business / supply chain projects mean it has been difficult to achieve a local critical mass necessary to create meaningful co-operation projects between territories, with opportunities for real knowledge-transfer between rural areas.

Links between the UK and Europe are therefore essential as some of the constraints on our rural economies are similar / the same, due to local geographies, climate, long-standing trade routes and technology-transfer mechanisms etc. We thus have much to share that is useful across borders and seas. A question remains as to how “early stage” knowledge transfer between rural areas might happen - especially if associated with activity that is not profit-generating – should the UK not participate in future EU programmes.

The four ROAD workshop questions were discussed during the afternoon session of this workshop and as expected there was little variation on workshops held by other UK partners and reported elsewhere in this Summary.

Workshop via Zoom – 24 April 2019

The question was asked is co-operation worthwhile and the response as expected was a resounding yes. Genuine cooperation leads to added value for all, but it must be co-ordinated. New bodies and structures are not needed but some funding for facilitation is required.

International co-operation is key to everything but as Europeans and members of the European Rural Parliament (ERP) we need to adapt and seek new ways of working together post the availability of EU funding.

The second key element is flexibility. We must share our knowledge and skills and not be protective as knowledge is power and should be shared in the interests of everyone. Everyone needs access to ideas in order to inspire and be inspired.

The importance of continuing co-operation was confirmed in the comment from Ben van Essen, Netherlands. "Of course, we realize that a Brexit does not mean that Britain is no longer part of Europe. So, we must maintain our good contacts. If these contacts will be less on governmental level, we should build forward on the contacts between citizens, especially in the rural areas. We should build forward on connecting grass roots initiatives"

Joe Saunders from the Irish Local Development Network said that we need to "continue with our existing relationships and ensure that those we collaborate with in UK and NI are networked and receive information of value. However, a fuller answer on how and who is dependent on the evolving situation"

Keith Harrison, Action with Communities in Rural Kent, said he "believed co-operation can happen without funding but from his perspective that would be local UK County/region/area based action. The important role for all of us in the ERP is sharing more widely across and outside the UK"

Concerns about the disconnection of young people were raised at the workshop held in Stalisfield Village Hall, Kent and how this should be addressed. Enthusiasm in the community by young people can lead to their later involvement in local and party politics. Katrina from the Latvian Youth Forum commented that there is "no reason not to engage; there is a political will to keep movement free and share good practice especially as circa 150K Latvians live and work in the UK. This applies particularly to young people, but everyone needs to be included"

The discussion concluded that there would be challenges in working together on EU funded projects, but that networking needs to be self-run. We need to grow and develop existing mechanisms for future knowledge transfer and co-operation.

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